

*Three Major Errors  
in Twelve English Translations  
of The Qur'an*

by

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# Acknowledgement

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## **Initial Observations**

To translate a work from one language to another is by no means an easy job. It is, in fact, an art which not all can master. The basic requirement to make a good job of it is high-grade command over both the languages — language of the work and the language in which it is to be translated — which include the literary traditions, complete knowledge of idioms and phraseologies, of the synonyms and antonyms and, more importantly, of all the shades of meanings a word or a particular expression in a language bears. In short the translator should have the "feel" of both the languages as T.B. Irwing puts it. This becomes all the more important when a religious scripture in a particular language is taken up for translation into another language. It requires extreme care and caution. And when it comes to translating Al-Qur'an, which is in the Arabic language that rightly boasts of the most extensive grammar and the richest vocabulary, well, it is a thing apart.

What is uniquely remarkable about Arabic language is that at the time when the Qur'an was revealed, there practically was no written literature in existence in that language ; it was as may be said, just a spoken language, and still the richest, the most beautiful and exhilarating of all the contemporary languages. It is unmatched

and unequalled to this day. It was not a vain boast that the Arabs called the people of the rest of the world *Ajami* meaning "dumb."

No translation of the Qur'an can claim to be nor can serve as a substitute for the Quranic text. One of the reasons is that, in the words of T.B. Irwing, "each time one returns to the Arabic text he finds new meaning, and fresh way of interpreting it. It is a living document." (Introduction to his *'The Qur'an--Translation and Commentary,'* page xii). In fact however meticulous an attempt, any translation of the Qur'an will, at best, only be an approximation of the meaning of The Qur'an. It is, therefore, rightly said that attempting to translate the Qur'an is attempting to translate the untranslatable.

A translator of the Qur'an has to be not only extremely cautious but also faithful to the text. He should not, in any degree, interpolate his own views and pass on the same as what the Qur'an says.

Further, any translation of the Qur'an without a study of the classical exegetical writings will be an exercise in futility. The big handicap that the works of the Europeans and some others who have attempted to translate the Qur'an into English suffer from is the almost total lack of the study of the classical (and even contemporary) exegetical works. This is the major reason for many of the English translations of the Qur'an being deficient.

And as late Dr. Hameedullah of revered memory says (in his *Introduction to Islam*) "in fact no translation replaces the original. There are, for instance, now-a-days numerous translations of the Holy Qur'an in English (as also in practically every language of the world), yet every now and then there are new and unceasing attempts to produce another translation, thinking that older ones are partly defective. This is true not only of English but of every

other language of the world."

One cannot agree more with Gordon Fielden of the Translator's Association, London, when he says: "It rarely is the case that you can just transfer horizontally from one language to another. Languages have different tones and resonances".

The Qur'an, of course, has not been translated in as many languages as the Bible, but the Qur'an has a clear edge over the Bible in that the latter has not been translated by so many different persons in the same language as the Qur'an, be it English, French, German, Urdu or Persian. But to my regret I find that in the more popular English translations of the Qur'an there are a number of major to minor errors, quite a few of those, blunders.

In this monograph I discuss three major errors in translating some verses of the Qur'an common to twelve translations in English. I have selected these three verses because the translation of these goes quite against as well as distorts three clear and well-known laws laid down in the Qur'an and regarding which there has been no difference of opinion worth the name ever since these had been revealed over fourteen hundred years ago. These verses are 2:231; 65:2; 2:275-76-78; 3:130; 4:161; 30:39; 24:2-3 and 17:32. The English translations I have checked with are:

- 1) *A Comprehensive Commentary on The Qur'an* by George Sale,
- 2) *The Qur'an* by E.H. Palmer,
- 3) *The Qur'an Interpreted* by Thomas J. Arberry,
- 4) *The Message of The Qur'an* by Mohammad Asad (formerly Leopold Weiss),
- 5) *The Qur'an* by N.J. Dawood, an Arab Jew, revised

by Mahmud Zayid, (hereafter referred to as Dawood-Zayid),

6) *The Glorious Qur'an* by Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall (a former Christian Englishman who embraced Islam) published for free distribution by Begum 'Ayesha Bawani Wakf, Karachi, (Pakistan),

7) *The Meaning of The Qur'an* by 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali (two separately revised editions, one got done through three different committees of scholars by the Presidency of Islamic Research, *Ifta*, Call and Guidance, Madinah Munawwarah and published for free distribution (hereafter referred to as 'Yusuf 'Ali, Madinah version') and the other got revised, through eminent scholars jointly by the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) and Amana Corporation of USA, and finally checked by late Rajhi Farooqi (the then Chairman of IIIT) and published for free distribution by Amana Corporation in collaboration with Al-Rajhi Company of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (hereafter referred to as 'Yusuf 'Ali, IIIT version'),

8) *Al-Qur'an—A Contemporary Translation* by Ahmad 'Ali (India),

9) *The Noble Qur'an* jointly done by Dr. Muhammad Taqiuddin Al-Hilali and Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan, both of the Islamic University, Madinah Munawwarah, and published by Maktaba Dar-us Salam, Riyadh (hereafter referred to as 'Hilali & Muhsin'),

10) *'Qur'an the fundamental Law of Human Life*, translation with commentary by Syed Anwar 'Ali published by Hamdard Foundation Press, Hamdard Centre, Karachi (Pakistan).

11) *'The Holy Qur'an* translated by Maulawi Sher 'Ali (a Qadiani), published by Qur'an Publications, Rabwah, Pakistan).

12) *The Qur'an — Translation and Commentary* by

Thomas Ballantine (T.B) Irving, later Al-Hajj T'alim 'Ali, published by Amana Books, Vermont, U.S.A.\*

Now a word about these translations and the revised versions of the work. As for 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali's, as already stated, it has been got revised by two different institutions and by a different group of scholars. Still I find a large number of errors in both the revised versions of which I am presently dealing with only three.

About his translation Muhammad Asad (who lived and wandered in the length and breadth of Arabia for over a decade, mixing with the desert Bedouins as well as the elites living in towns to gain mastery over the Arabic language) claims in the foreword: "It is an attempt – perhaps the first attempt – at a really idiomatic, explanatory rendition of the Qur'anic message into an European language."

The one by N.J. Dawood (checked and revised by Mahmud Y. Zayid of the American University, Beirut, assisted by a committee of Muslim scholars) is published by Dar-Choura, Beirut, and carries a certificate by Dr. Hussain Quwwaity, General Director of the Affairs relating to *Ifit*, Beirut, stating that the translation has been "checked by our special committee (and) we give permission for its publication and circulation." And another certificate: "We strongly recommend it to the readers and approve its printing and circulation" issued by the Supreme Shi'i Council in Beirut. The original by Dawood has been published by Penguin in their Classic Translation series.

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\*of all the English translations that I have seen it is only *The Qur'an—Arabic Text with Corresponding English Meaning* (1999 Edition) published by Abul Qasim Publishing House (Jeddah) which I have found to be free of the three errors dealt with in this monograph.

Pickthall writes in his foreward to the translation, "the Book is here rendered almost literally" and further records, "before publication the work has been scrutinised word by word and thoroughly revised in Egypt with the help of one whose mother-tongue is Arabic, has studied The Qur'an and who knows English; and when difficulties were encountered the translator had recourse to perhaps the greatest living authority on the subject. Every care has thus been taken to avoid un-warranted rendering." However, I find a number of errors in his translation also.

Ahmad 'Ali's work claims: "This translation has been approved by eminent Islamic scholars."

About the translation jointly done by Dr. Taqiuddin Al-Hilali and Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan, the Chancellor of the Islamic University, Madinah, Dr. 'Abdullah Bin Saleh Al-'Obaid, in his Introduction writes: "Both of them worked hard to bring forth the translation in the most accurate and correct form.... This translation was then revised by Dr. Muhammad Amin Al-Misri, who was the head of Higher Studies Department, Islamic University, Madinah, at that time, and also by Dr. V. 'Abdur Rahim, Supervisor at the Arabic language section of the university....." Giving up 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali's, the Government of Saudi Arabia has now started printing this translation for free distribution worldwide. Its pocket edition has also been printed and another edition without Arabic text is also to be printed.

T.B. Irving, in Introduction to his work, says, "The present work has been prepared in order to spread greater understanding of the Islamic religion ..... with a clear rendition of the original Arabic. My aim has been to *remain scrupulously faithful to the Arabic text* (emphasis mine) and still create a version... which can be used confidently by English speaking people" (p.xxiv).



## First Error

Now to the erroneous translations.

I first take up verse 2:231. This is how it has been translated:

1. "But when you divorce women and *they have fulfilled their prescribed time*, either retain them with humanity or dismiss them in kindness...." (George Sale)
2. "When you divorce women, and *they have reached their prescribed time*, then keep them kindly or let them go in reason....." (Palmer)
3. "When you divorce women and *they have reached their term*, then retain them honourably or set them free honourably....." (Arberry)
4. "When you have divorced women and *they have reached their term*, then retain them in kindness or release them in kindness....." (Pickthall)
5. "When you have divorced your wives and *they have reached the end of their waiting period*, either retain them in honour or let them go in kindness...." (Dawood- Zayid)

6. "Once you divorce women, and *they have reached the end of their waiting period*, then either retain them in all decency or part from them decently..." (T.B. Irving)
7. "When you have divorced your women and *they have reached the end of their waiting period*, then keep them honourably or let them go with honour...." (Ahmad 'Ali)
8. "When you divorce women and *they fulfil the term of their (iddah)*, either take them back on equitable terms or set them free on equitable terms...." (Yusuf 'Ali, III T version)
9. "And when you have divorced women and *they have fulfilled the term of their prescribed period*, either take them back on reasonable basis or set them free on reasonable basis...." (Hilali & Muhsin).
10. "And when you divorce women *and they reach their prescribed time*, then either retain them in kindness..." (Anwar 'Ali)

The italicised portions in all these ten translations are grossly erroneous and do present a totally wrong picture of Islamic law on divorce. It is common knowledge, and has all along been accepted without any difference of opinion, that in case of revocable (provisional) divorce i.e., divorce pronounced by the husband for the first time or for the second time, the husband can revoke the divorce by an overt act signifying his intention to do so or by word of mouth, *before the expiry of the iddah period* (three monthly courses as per 2:228 or three months in the case of a woman past the age of menstruation). Now, once the *iddah* period expires, as all the above quoted translations do unmistakably convey, the woman goes out of the wedlock and the divorce becomes final and

irrevocable leaving the husband with no option or power to *retain* her as stated in (1), (3), (4), (5), (6) and (10) or to *take them back* as in (8) and (9) or to *keep them kindly / honourably* as in (2) and (7). Once the *iddah* period expires, the divorced woman finally goes out of the wedlock and she can neither be 'retained' nor can she be 'taken back' by the divorcing husband. To resume marital relationship in case of revocable divorce (upto the second divorce) after the completion of the *iddah*, both have to undergo a fresh marriage by fixing a fresh dower (the case of their re-union as spouses after a third divorce is covered by 2:230).

The fact is that Verse 2:231 covers the situation when divorce has been pronounced (either once or for the second time) and the woman has *not yet completed* the *iddah* period. During this period the marital relationship does not come to an end but subsists, and thus it is open for the husband to revoke the divorce and retain the woman in wedlock. (Incidentally, the translation 'take them back' as in (8) and (9) is even more incorrect as the stage of taking back comes only when a thing goes out of one's possession or, in the present context, when the divorced woman goes out of the wedlock because of the completion of the *iddah* without the husband having, during that period, revoked the divorce, while verse 2:231 is dealing with the stage when the woman is still not out of the wedlock.

The key words in the text which have been quite erroneously translated are *fabalaghna ajalahunna* فَبَلَغْنَاهُنَّ أَجَلَهُنَّ. As I have stated above one of the basic principles to be strictly adhered to while translating from one language into another is that if a word or an expression in the language of the original text carries more than one meaning then the meaning which conforms to the context in which the word/expression occurs has to be adopted when translating it. The Arabic words *fabalaghna ajalahunna* carry two meanings; one, to denote the expiry of a time period and, two, to denote a stage when the time period is about to expire and has

not yet expired. It is the second meaning in which these Arabic words have been used in 2:231 as agreed to by all scholars and commentators of the Qur'an, without a single exception, and as elaborated above by me.

The succeeding verses 2:232 and 234 make the point amply clear. Here also exactly the same words (*fabalaghna ajalahunna*) appear and all the learned translators have translated it as to mean the completion of the *iddah* (identical to 2:231 by Sale, Yusuf 'Ali [III T version], Hilali & Muhsin, Irving and Dawood-Zayid). Only Pickthall has made a slight deviation which reads "..... and they reach their term" (whereas it was here in 2:232 that he should have been as categorical as in translating 2:231 while there he is quite wrong). Verse 2:232 deals with the situation where the divorced woman has completed/fulfilled her term of *iddah* after the first or second pronouncement of divorce and her husband has not, before the expiry of the period, revoked the divorce (to 'retain' her as spouse) and she having thus gone out of wedlock, the question of her remarrying the former husband or marrying some other person arises. Verse 2:232 is meant to give the woman freedom of choice in the matter of her second marriage which may either be with her former husband or with some other person she chooses to go over to as wife. (But in case of her having been divorced for the third time, her remarrying the former husband is prohibited save as provided in 2:230). Verse 2:234 deals with the case of widows who have *fulfilled* the prescribed waiting (*iddah*) period..

Only Muhammad Asad and Sher 'Ali have correctly translated 2:231 to read : And when you divorce women and they are *about to reach* the end of their waiting term. then either retain them....." (Asad), and "when you divorce your wives and they *approach the end* of their appointed period, then either retain them....." (Sher 'Ali).

In the original by ‘Abdullah Yusuf ‘Ali the erroneous translation of 2:231 is "when you divorce women and they fulfil the term of their (*iddah*), either *take them back..... or set them free.....*" The reviewing committees (of Madinah Version) spotted the error and corrected it to read ".... and they (*are about to*) fulfil the term of their *iddat.....*" But, surprisingly, the learned reviewers have retained the words "take them back...." which, as explained above, is quite wrong and should correctly be "retain them (as wives).....or let them go....." as done by Muhammad Asad and Sher ‘Ali. More surprisingly while the learned reviewers of Madinah version spotted the error and corrected it in the translation of 2:231, as explained above, the same error escaped their notice in 65:2.

The same words *fabalaghna ajalahunna* قَبَلْنَاهُنَّ أَجَلَهُنَّ appear in the earlier part of 65:2 and there also the context is the same as in 2:231. Here again all translators named above, except Asad and Sher ‘Ali, have committed the same error as in translating these words in 2:231. Even the learned reviewers of the Madinah version, who made the necessary correction in 2:231, allowed the erroneous translation, as originally done by Yusuf ‘Ali, ("when they fulfil their term appointed, either take them back.....") to stand in 65:2. Muhammad Asad and Sher ‘Ali both have translated 65:2 correctly in the same way as in 2:231 i.e "when they are *about to reach* the end of their waiting term...." (Asad). Sher ‘Ali has translated it slightly differently, but correctly, to read "then when they *are about to reach* their prescribed term, keep them with kindness or put them away with kindness."

Thus the English translation of 2:231 as done by the translators named above is quite erroneous for it distorts the clear Islamic law on divorce.

## Second Error

Next to be taken up are verses 2:275, 276, 278: 3:130, 4:161 and 30:39. There is one very important word in all these verses which has been translated quite erroneously by all the translators and the erroneous translation distorts a very important law of Islam. That Arabic word is *riba* رِبَا which has been translated by all the above named translators except Sher 'Ali and T.B. Irving, as 'usury'.

Now, "usury", as every English dictionary tells us, means exorbitant, exploitative or excessive rate of *interest*. If the word "usury" is accepted as the translation of *riba* it would mean that the prohibition so categorically, forcefully and awe-inspiringly declared ("Allah has permitted trade and forbidden interest", 2:275; and "O ye who believe, fear Allah and give up what remains of your demand towards interest and if you do not, *take notice of war from Allah and His Messenger...*" 2:278-9) is only for charging (and paying) excessive rate of interest and, conversely speaking, charging and paying interest at a low or reasonable rate is permitted by Allah! Islamic law is clear; it forbids taking any amount, however low and insignificant it may be, in excess of or over and above the principle amount (*raas-ul maal* رَأْسُ الْمَالِ as it is called in Arabic) given as loan, and terms any amount in excess of the *raas-ul maal* as *riba* and strictly forbids it. Unfortunately most of the translators named above have translated *riba* as 'usury'.

In Arabic language there is only one word -- *riba* -- which covers the English words "usury" and "interest" both. In fact, in English language, too, the word "usury" is a later introduction. In 17th century when banks (in their early form) started functioning in England, the rate of interest charged by the banks was considerably lower than what was then charged by money-lenders. It was to differentiate between the two that the bankers gave currency to the word "usury" (derived, perhaps, as some say, from the word 'usurp') in contra-distinction with "interest". But Islam brooks no such distinction and strictly forbids charging any amount over and above the principle, even if it be just one straw over ten thousand gold coins (the ratio given is just by way of illustration). Interest in all its varied forms, be it just nominal or exorbitant/exploitative, simple or compound, and regardless of the loan being of a consumer (personal) or productive (commercial) nature, is completely forbidden.

The translation of the word *riba* as "usury", may be acceptable only when it has appeared in 3:130 because there the word *riba* is qualified with *ad'afun mud'afah* أَضْعَافًا مُّضَاعَفَةً i.e. "doubled and multiplied", as has been translated by all, which may terminologically be described as "compound interest". But this does not provide any justification for the same translation in the other verses for two reasons: one, that verse 3:130 was not revealed to prohibit the charging of interest but in the backdrop of the reverse suffered by the Muslims in the Battle of Uhud (Hijra year 3) it was meant to just create an aversion against worldly allurements; two, there is no similar qualifying expression in 2:275 wherein charging (and paying) interest, *per se*, has been categorically declared as *haram* (forbidden) "....Allah has permitted trading and forbidden *riba*....."; nor so in any other verse (except in 3:130) wherein this word (*riba*) has appeared.

The case of Ahmad 'Ali is interesting -- curious rather. While

translating 2:275 he has used both 'usury' (in three places) and 'interest' at one place: "Those who live on *usury*.... this because they say that trading is like *usury*, but trade has been sanctioned and *usury* forbidden by God... will keep (what they have taken of *interest*) already." His translation of 2:276 is "God takes away (gain) from *usury*...." but he has translated 2:278 as "O Belivers, fear God and forego the *interest* that is owing....." Then his translation of 3:130 is "O you who believe, do not practice *usury* charging doubled and redoubled (*interest*) but have fear of God....." In translating 30:39 he has used *usury* only.

It appears that to Ahmad 'Ali 'usury' and 'interest' are synonymous which is not the case.

It is, thus, an obvious distortion of the clear Islamic law to translate the Qur'anic word *riba* as "usury" as the translators have done. Only Sher 'Ali and T.B. Irving have translated the word *riba* ربا as 'interest' in all these verses except in 30:39 where, surprisingly, Irving has switched over to 'Usury'.

My feeling is that employing the word "usury" in translating *riba* is not inadvertent but in deliberate preference to 'interest'. The reason, I think, is that influenced by the stream of Western thought the learned translators also believed that trade, commerce and economy in modern times cannot flourish, or survive even, without the interest-based banking system and other financing institutions. On the other hand they were confronted with the Qur'an's categorical declaration forbidding the taking (and giving) of interest, further supported by the authentic Traditions of the Prophet (pbuh). They thus found themselves in an embarrassing situation; if the word *riba* is translated with 'interest' Islam will be branded as an impractical religion sponsoring a stagnated medieval economic order with no progress in commerce and



industry and flashing prosperity. To wriggle out of this dilemma they thought of 'usury' as the translation for *riba* which would restrict the prohibition to excessive and exploitative rate of 'interest' and thus leave the field open for a moderate rate of interest which the banks and financial institutions claim they charge in comparison with what the private money-lenders of earlier times used to charge, or charge even today.

It appears that Muhammad Asad was quite conscious of this dilemma and therefore he has given a very lengthy explanatory note (No.35) to verse 30:39 (this because *surah* 30 is earlier to *surah* 2 and 3 in chronological order of revelation). At one place in the foot-note he says "considering the problem in terms of economic conditions prevailing at or before their time, most of the early Muslim jurists identified this unlawful addition with profits obtained through any kind of interest-bearing loans *irrespective of the rate of interest* and the economic motivation involved" (emphasis added).

Asad is not right in attributing the above view to 'most of the early Muslim jurists.' That was, in fact, the opinion firmly held by *all* the early Muslim jurists. Besides, what is important to note is that Asad does not give any hint of his being in agreement with the early jurists in the matter. On the other hand, his holding a contrary view (that it is only the exorbitant and exploitative rate of interest which the Qur'an prohibits) is clearly reflected in his observation in the same foot-note: "The opprobrium of *riba*.... attached to profits obtained through the interest-bearing loans involving an *exploitation of economically weak by the strong and resourceful*...." (emphasis added by Asad himself).

I am not surprised so much at Asad, Palmer, Sale, Arberry, Dawood, Pickthall, Yusuf 'Ali and Irwing committing this error as I am at Hilali & Muhsin committing it and at finding the same also in

the IIIT and Madinah (revised) versions of Yusuf 'Ali's, for which I can think of no explanation. As a Muslim one should hold the firm belief that when Allah has prohibited interest and declared that He deprives interest of all blessings (2:276) it has but to be so. And it is not a mere wishful thinking or a vain boast. Not just for a few years but for some centuries while Islam was in the driving seat, the economy under the Muslims' rule was totally free of interest and trade and commerce also flourished in good measure bringing about all-round prosperity and elimination of poverty. The ratio of those living (what in these days is known as) below the poverty line to the affluent was much lower than what it is today even in advanced countries with interest-infected economy. There was trade at inter-continental level and after the conquest of Spain the Muslims started even maritime trade at a big scale, all free of the element of interest. On the other hand the report of the World Bank for 1995-1996 clearly admits that interest is the main cause of increasing economic disparity between the rich and poor.

Be that as it may, the fundamental point is, and we say it without any trace of apology, that Islam basically aims at establishing not a prosperous society but a pious society. Prosperity *sans* or at the cost of piety is wholly unacceptable to Islam, and we firmly believe also that the restrictions of *halal* and *haram* (permitted and prohibited) as laid down by Islam do not scuttle the growth of economy but greatly help in achieving all-round prosperity.

Those who claim that what has been prohibited in absolute terms in 2:275 and has been termed as *riba* is only excessive and prohibitive rate of interest (i.e. 'usury') and not 'interest' at a *fair* rate, studiously avoid stating what that *fair* (standard) rate of 'interest' is which the *Shari'ah* allows Muslims to charge and whether it is uniform on productive (commercial) loans and consumer (personal) loans. Without this it will not wash to simply say that only usury is prohibited and 'interest' is permitted in Islam.

Then these people will have to *prove* also that even after the revelation of 2:275 interest-bearing deals were continued to be made by the Muslims during the life-time of the Prophet and during the days of the Caliphs and later. And further that when, during the Farewell Pilgrimage, the Prophet, in exercise of his authority as the enforcer of the *Shari'ah*, wrote off all the money due to Hadrat 'Abbas (his own uncle and the leading money-lender of the time) by way of *riba* رِبَا, he did so only in respect of usurious excess over and above the principal رَأْسُ الْمَالِ and allowed Hadrat Abbas to recover what was due to him by way of simple interest, or reduced the due amount from usurious level to a *fair* level of interest, and allowed Hadrat 'Abbas to receive the same.

This these people cannot do.

## Third Error

Lastly verses 17:32 and 24:2-3. Here again the erroneous translation of the Arabic word *Zina* has completely distorted a well-established *Shari'ah* law. In 17:32 the word *zina* appears while in 24:2-3 the words are *Zania* and *Zani* meaning a female and a male person committing *Zina*. In Arabic language the word *zina* means unlawful sexual act by men or women. When a married person commits *zina*, i.e. has sex with other than spouse, if a female, she is called *zania* and if a male, he is called *zani*. If both indulging in sexual act with each other are unmarried or one of them is married but to another person, in that case, too, the act is called *zina* and the parties to it are called *Zania* and *Zani*. In short, illegal sex is *zina* in Arabic and parties to it are called *zania* and *zani*. But it is not so in the English language which has two separate words for illegal sex by a married person and sex by an unmarried person. For the former, i.e., for sex by a married person with other than the spouse the word in English language is 'adultery' and the doer of the act is termed as adulteress/adulterer. For sex by an unmarried person the word in English language is 'fornication' and she or he indulging in fornication is called 'fornicatress and fornicator respectively. In Islamic law the prescribed punishments for fornication and adultery, both called *zina* in Arabic, are vastly different: one hundred lashes for fornication and death for adultery. It is regrettable that this important difference has been lost sight of by most of the translators resulting in major distortion of Islamic

law on the subject.

Take the case of 24:2 first. This verse speaks of the punishment of one hundred lashes, as translated by all, for the *zanīa* and *zanī*. This punishment is universally accepted by the Muslims to be for sex by an unmarried person. Therefore the word *zanīa* and *zanī* appearing in this verse must be translated as 'fornicatress' and 'fornicator' respectively.

But Asad, Dawood-Zayid, Irving and Pickthall have translated *zīna* with 'adultery' in 17:32 and, Ahmad 'Ali included, with 'adulteress and adulterer' in 24:2-3. In the case of 24:2 it is grossly incorrect as 24:2 deals exclusively with fornicatress and fornicator and has nothing to do with adulteress and adulterer. The translation as done by these translators would show that under Islamic law the punishment for adultery is one hundred lashes while it is, in fact, death. The punishment of one hundred lashes as laid down in 24:2 is for fornication. In 17:32 it is incomplete as the word *zīna* therein covers adultery and fornication both. Arberry has used fornicatress and fornicator in 24:2 which is quite correct but it is not wholly correct in 24:3 as 24:3 covers adulterer and adulteress also. Similarly Arberry should have put in 'adultery' also in the translation of 17:32 but he has used 'fornication' only. Ahmad 'Ali has also done the same.

The case of 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali's (Madinah version) is interesting. In his original the translation of 24:2 was "The woman and the man guilty of adultery or fornication...." Injecting the word 'adultery' here is erroneous as discussed above. But the reviewers of its IIIT version allowed it to stand while the reviewers of the Madinah version deleted, and rightly so, the word 'adultery' from the translation. However, in the translation of 24:3 there is a bizarre development. Its translation as originally and correctly done by Yusuf 'Ali and retained in IIIT version is "let no man guilty of adultery or

fornication marry...." But the reviewers in the Madinah version have changed it to "the adulterer can not have sexual relations with any but an adulteress..." Failure to include 'fornicator' and 'fornicatress' in the translation of 24:3 is a major lapse. Further, the addition of "(having a sexual relation with)" is wholly superfluous.

The word *zina* appearing in 17:32 has been translated by Yusuf 'Ali, in the original as well as in both the revised versions, as 'adultery' which is incomplete as it covers fornication also.

Now to 24:3. This verse is in general terms laying down that one given to illegal sex, be he/she a fornicator / fornicatress or an adulterer/adulteress should marry none but a like person. The Qur'an has here also used the word *zani* and *zaniah*, which, as said above, covers married and unmarried persons both. Therefore, the appropriate manner of translating the verse would be to write "adulterer / adulteress" and "fornicator/fornicatress". But all the translators have used adulterer and adulteress only which is meaningless as adultery refers to and covers married persons only and it will carry no sense to say, as the translations go, that "an adulterer must not marry any but an adulteress..."

E.H. Palmer's is different from all. In 24:2-3 he has used the words "whore" and "whore-monger" which is quite proper in 24:3 but not in 24:2 because here the words *zaniah* and *zani* specifically refer to only unmarried persons committing *zina*. Similarly, the word *zina* appearing in 17:32 has been incorrectly translated by all as "adultery" ("Come not near to adultery") because this verse prohibits not only adultery but fornication also, quite equally. By limiting the intent of this verse to adultery only would mean that what this verse forbids is only adultery and does not address itself to fornication. That will be a clear distortion. In translating this verse, too, both the words "adultery" and "fornication" should have been used to read "come not near to adultery / fornication."

Hilali & Muhsin, on the other hand, have quite correctly translated 17:32 as "And come not near to the unlawful sexual intercourse..." (although "the" here is redundant). However, while they appear to be conscious of the intent and scope of 24:2 their choice of English words is faulty. Their translation is "The woman and the man guilty of illegal sexual intercourse..." It is faulty because the words "the woman and the man" being general include married and unmarried both in their sweep while 24:2 deals exclusively with unmarried persons. The correct translation would, therefore, be "the unmarried woman and unmarried man..." and in that case the word "illegal" will be redundant as sex by unmarried persons is illegal *per se*. In fact, fornicatress and fornicator serve the purpose eminently. In translating 24:3 Hilali & Muhsin, too, have committed the same error as others and which I have dealt with above.

It is, however, to be noted that Hilali & Muhsin appear to be quite aware of 24:2 relating only to un-married persons (fornicatress and fornicator). They have translated 4:15 as "and those of your women who commit illegal sexual intercourse\* ..... confine them (i.e women) to houses until..... Allah ordains for them some other way." In the footnote (1) they have written: "the provision of this verse has been abrogated by the verse of Surat An-nur (verse 24:2),

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\* Hilali & Muhsin appear to have special fondness (in addition to the use of brackets which they have extravagantly done) for the expression *illegal / unlawful sexual intercourse* which they have very frequently used in their translation. So much so that out of about 17 verses wherein the Arabic word *fahisha* has appeared in the Qur'an, at 13 places they have translated it with illegal / unlawful sexual intercourse, (while other translators have opted for the words 'lewdness', indecency etc.) And horror of horrors! they have not restrained themselves even when the Qur'an is addressing the consorts of the Prophet -- the *Ummahat-ul Mu'mineen* -- mothers of all Muslims. Their translation of 33:30 is

"O wives of the Prophet! Whoever of you commits an open illegal sexual intercourse, the torment for her will be doubled, and that is very easy for Allah.

ordaining lashing for the unmarried and *stoning to death for the married, when four witnesses testify to the crime*": (Italics supplied).

"Lashing for the unmarried" in the footnote clearly shows that the learned translators are aware that the punishment of one hundred lashes ordained in 24:2 is for sex by unmarried persons (fornicators). That being so it is un-understandable why they have not added the word 'unmarried' (in brackets though) in their translation of 24:2 to read "the (unmarried) woman and the man guilty of sexual intercourse..... "

It must be further pointed out that the italicised words "and stoning to death ..... to the crime" in the footnote quoted above being written in straight continuation of the earlier portion do convey the sense that these (italicised) words also, like 'lashing for the unmarried' form part of 24:2 which, in fact, is not the case. Verse 24:2 does not speak of 'stoning to death for the married.' This portion, if at all, should have formed a separate sentence within brackets with the clarification that it is based on Hadith. However, this part in the footnote is superfluous in view of the footnotes (a) and (b) to 24:2 where the position has been fully explained, in faulty language though.

What Muahmmad Asad has done is quite strange. While translating 24:2 he has erroneously used the words "adulteress" and "adulterer" for *zaniyah* and *zani*, in the explanatory note has correctly set out the difference between adultery and fornication. And then he has proceeded to say "for the sake of simplicity I am rendering *zina* throughout as adultery and the person guilty of it as an adulterer or adulteress respectively." Asad's inexplicable perception of simplicity apart, this explanatory note would have been of some use for the readers if he would have clarified that



24:2 refers specifically to the fornicatress and fornicator only. Absence of this clarification has rendered this explanatory note almost meaningless.

Yet another deficiency this explanatory note suffers from is that Asad has explained fornication as "sexual intercourse between two unmarried persons". This is not wholly correct and again gives misinformation about the Islamic law on the subject. Actually, fornication simply is sex by an unmarried person; not necessarily between two unmarried persons. It can be that one of the parties to *zina* is unmarried and the other married. In that case both will not be treated equally under Islamic law; the unmarried partner to *zina* will be treated as fornicator / fornicatress and punished with one hundred lashes while the married partner will be treated as adulterer/adulteress and shall be punished with death. Muhammad Asad has failed to clarify this point also.

Only Syed Anwer 'Ali (Hamdard — Pakistan) has correctly translated 24:2. It reads, "the fornicatress and the fornicator — flog each of them with a hundred stripes....". But, surprisingly, he is not so correct in translating 17:32. *la taqrabuzzina* لا تقربوا الزنى in 17:32 has been translated as "and go not nigh to adultery". The Arabic word *zina* here, as stated above, covers adultery and fornication both and it is wrong to limit it to adultery. As it is, it would mean that the Qur'an enjoins to desist from adultery only (i.e., a married man or woman having sex with other than the spouse) while the Qur'an, in fact, addresses both in 17:32 and enjoins to keep away from adultery and fornication both as both are punishable offences. In 24:3 Anwer 'Ali has used adulterer and adultress only whereas this verse also covers adultery and fornication both.

Palmer has translated 17:32 as "and draw not near to fornication..." This, too, is faulty because this translation limits the injunction to fornication while the verse covers adultery as well.

The case of Sher 'Ali is interesting. He appears to be conscious of the difference in the meaning of English words 'adultery' and 'fornication' for both of which there is one word *zina* in Arabic. Because of this he has translated 24:2 as "the adulteress and the adulterer (or the fornicatress and the fornicator) flog each one of them with hundred stripes..." But he is wrong in employing both 'adultery' and 'fornication' in the translation of this verse because, as explained above 24:2 lays down the punishment of 'hundred stripes' which is for fornication only and not for adultery.

But he is right in using both words in translating 24:3 and 17:32.